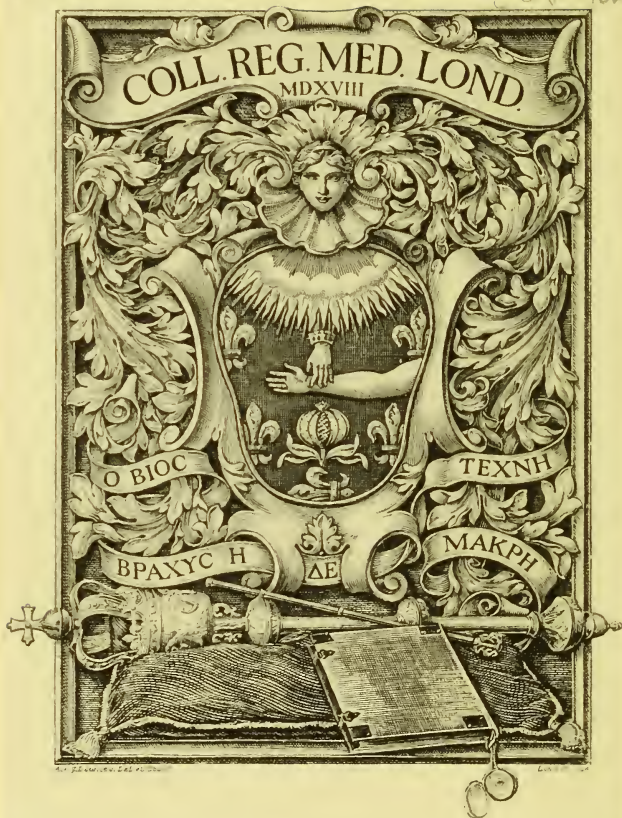



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INQUIRY, &c.

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Wm. G. L. B.

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[Sir Sibbald Blane]

To the Honble Mr Lambton &c &c
best compliments

INQUIRY

INTO THE

CAUSES AND REMEDIES

OF THE LATE AND PRESENT

SCARCITY

AND

HIGH PRICE OF PROVISIONS,

IN A

LETTER

TO THE

Right Hon. Earl Spencer, K. G.

FIRST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY,

&c. &c. &c.

THE SECOND EDITION.

LONDON:

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TO THE

Right Hon. Earl Spencer, K.G.

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MY LORD,

I HAVE, for a great part of my life, been in the habit of studying political economy as a recreation, in those hours which I could spare from the duties of my station. Though these duties have but little relation to this subject, they have been such as to enable me to converse with, and derive information, not only from those who are eminent for their rank and learning, but for their practical knowledge. What was before a matter of taste and amusement, now becomes a matter of duty ; for, the present scarcity and high price of provisions is a subject

upon which, from its peculiar nature, it is of the utmost importance that not only the members of government, but every individual, should form correct opinions. As errors among the governed, as well as the governing, are here of the most serious and dangerous consequence, every good man must feel it incumbent on him, to endeavour not only to form his own opinion upon the most solid grounds, but, to the best of his ability, to lend his assistance to others in doing so.

As what I have to communicate would derive no weight from my name, it is of no consequence that it should be known: but, knowing the deep interest your Lordship takes in this question, I court the sanction of your name, in thus addressing you, and submit the following inquiry to you, not only as a member of the legislature, as one of his Majesty's hereditary counsellors, and one of his ministers, presiding over a great department of the state with the most eminent ability, zeal, and success, but also as one who, by his independence, his private
virtues,

virtues, and various talents, has conciliated the confidence, respect, and affection of the nation, and who is acknowledged to be a promoter and a judge of whatever is beneficial to society.

In inquiring into the causes and remedies of the present distress, much light may be derived from the experience of past times. It appears, from history, that there has been no famine in this country for more than three hundred and fifty years ; though, in that time, there have been frequent instances of distress, from scarcity and dearth. Famines were frequent, not only before the Norman conquest, during the Saxon and Danish dynasties, but since that æra, till near the end of the Plantagenet race of kings. During this latter period, though the records of the times are very imperfect in most other points, they are tolerably satisfactory with regard to this ; for, it was the custom of the annalists of those days to mark the weather from year to year : and it appears that famines never occurred, except after bad seasons. It is,

however, probable, that what were famines would sometimes have only been cases of extraordinary dearth, had it not been for impolitic institutions and regulations. The laws, prohibiting the transportation of corn from one part of the country to another, must certainly have contributed to aggravate the evil; and there is one instance of a regulation to fix the price of provisions, in the year 1314, to which some historians attribute the famine of the following year. However this may be, it may be considered as an historical fact, that famines never occurred in these ages, but after bad seasons. How little they depend on public convulsions may be inferred from hence, that they were unknown during the great political struggles, such as the civil wars of York and Lancaster, and those of the king and parliament. The last famine in England was in the year 1438, in the time of Henry VI.; but it was before the disastrous civil wars of that reign.

As there is no reason to presume that the course of nature, for the last ~~two~~ ^{three} hundred and fifty

fifty years, has been different from what it was before that period, some knowledge, of the utmost importance to the points in question, may be derived from inquiring into the circumstances which rendered those ages so liable to these severe calamities, particularly the 14th century, which was remarkable both for famine and pestilence all over Europe.

1. The low state of agriculture.—This was owing not only to the backwardness of these ages in every branch of industry, but to the mean and degrading state in which the labourers in agriculture were held in consequence of the prevalence of feudal and military ideas. It appears that, in the 13th and 14th centuries,* corn sold for more than three times as much as the same weight of butchers meat. It is just the reverse in our times. The reason of this no doubt is, that pasturage, requiring little exertion of ta-

* The historical facts, mentioned in this letter, are taken chiefly from Hume's or Henry's Histories of England, and Dr. Smith's Wealth of Nations.

lents or labour, is the favourite pursuit of rude times ; whereas, agriculture, requiring great diligence and skill, flourishes most in ages of civilization and industry.

We may infer from this, that the proportion of corn to animal food was much less in these ages than in our times. The quantity of grain used for food must then however have been very considerable, otherwise the deficiency of it would not have occasioned famine ; and it is a matter of serious reflection, that a like deficiency now, would be still more fatal, as we depend so much more on the productions of agriculture : a consideration which should add to our anxiety and vigilance, with regard to the means of prevention.

2. A more scanty production, in proportion to the number and necessities of the consumers, owing to the more simple manners of the times.—Before the introduction of refinement and luxury there was no inducement to produce more than what was necessary

for mere sustenance. The quantity of grain employed, in later times, in brewing, distilling, feeding of horses, and other articles of unnecessary consumption, becomes a sort of disposable surplus, so that in times of scarcity great part of it may be turned into the channels of necessity. It is evident, then, however paradoxical it may at first sight appear, that luxury, or what by some may be called waste, is one of the resources against famine. In fact, what can be so dreadful as, that in years of common plenty there should be produced just enough, and no more, than what will suffice for the necessities of nature. Where this is strictly the case, every bad season must be productive of famine, exclusive of foreign importation? The unnecessary expenditure in years of plenty may therefore be considered as a perpetual public granary, far more permanent and less precarious than any that could be made in storehouses, where grain is apt to decay; and which require the constant vigilance of the magistrate to replenish. However expedient and commendable, therefore, it may be in times of scarcity to make retrenchments in articles of luxury,

ury, it would be highly impolitic and dangerous to make such retrenchments perpetual.

3. The want of internal and foreign commerce.—It appears, from the records of the times, that there was no method of equalizing the consumption of different seasons; for, in the same year, the prices of corn, at different times, would vary not a third or a fourth, not three or four times, but eight or nine times, as will appear by inspecting the tables that have been constructed of the annual prices * of wheat, from the year 1202, till the year 1764. It appears from the same tables, that the plenty of one year was not called in aid of the scarcity of another, for a wide difference between years immediately preceding or succeeding each other is observed constantly occurring. It equally appears, that the wants and distress of one part of the country were not relieved by the greater plenty that prevailed in adjoining districts. It is mentioned in the Chronicle of Dunstable, a document fre-

* See Smith on the Wealth of Nations.

quently quoted by historians, that while wheat sold at Dunstable, for a crown the quarter, it was sold at Northampton for eight shillings. There were, in those days, many unavoidable obstacles to free intercourse, such as the want of high-roads, canals, and posts. But these difficulties might have been surmounted, had it not been for a law prohibiting the transportation of corn from one county to another. That such a law did exist, appears by a regulation established in 1440, whereby commissioners of the customs were authorized to grant licences for the carrying of corn from one county to another. Lastly, there was no corn imported from foreign countries in those ages. But what completed the annihilation of commerce, was, that the popular odium, and the severity of the laws against forestallers, were then at their height. Authors stigmatize them by every opprobrious epithet which language can furnish; the penalties inflicted by law, were, forfeiture of goods and chattels, pillory, imprisonment, banishment, and, in the reign of Edward III. the punishment was made *death*, by a statute

which, however, was repealed in the same reign. This reign, though held so glorious abroad, from the splendid victories in France, appears to have been one of the most calamitous at home ; both famine and pestilence having raged with the utmost severity.

When we consider, therefore, that there was no relief to be derived, in case of scarcity, from one season to another, from one year to another, from one county to another, nor from one country to another, we may safely ascribe, to want of commerce, the greatest share in producing the famines of those times, of all the causes that have been enumerated, except bad seasons.

What, then, are the changes which have taken place since the middle of the 15th century, which have ever since that time prevented scarcity from amounting to famine?—The more immediate causes seem to have been the freedom of internal commerce, which began to take place in 1440, two years after the last famine ; and importation from foreign countries, which we for
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the first time hear of in history a few years afterwards. Soon after this, commerce and civilization began to make rapid advances, under the Princes of the house of Tudor, and have continued to flourish and extend themselves, ever since, so as to bring this country into its present state of unequalled prosperity and grandeur.—The improvements in agriculture, and its becoming more honourable, together with the introduction of potatoes, have been additional resources, in still later times.—And it is certainly none of the least advantages concomitant upon wealth and industry, that they have been instrumental in preventing such grievous calamities as famines. For, however deplorable the evils of the present day may be, how far short are they of the calamities of those periods, in which a year like the last would have been productive of famine, and perhaps of its usual concomitant, pestilence ! the state of society and manners being then such, that the quantity of food, produced and imported, bore a less proportion to the population than it does in our days : and the prejudices of the age being such, as not to

allow middle-men to apportion and equalize the consumption of different seasons, as is so happily exemplified in our times.

Having premised this much with regard to past times, let us now inquire into the causes of the present scarcity and high price of provisions.

The summer and autumn of the year 1799 was colder and more rainy than any in the memory of man, and crops have never, in our time, been so scanty, nor so badly got in. The enormous deficiency of one-third of an average crop is the least which any intelligent calculator has assigned, and many made it much greater. That was certainly one of those seasons, which, in the 14th century, would have been followed by a famine; and how has this been prevented, but by those operations of commerce whereby the consumption of the several seasons of the year, and of the various districts of the country, are duly equalized and compensated? Had the product of last year's crop been brought to market, in the quantities and at the prices of a year of plenty,

who

who does not see that there must have been nothing to bring to the summer markets. Could this economy have been effected by any other means than an advanced price, the necessary consequence of withholding from the consumption of one season what is requisite for the supply of another? Had there not been men who accumulated and reserved these supplies, and conveyed them to where they were most wanted, we must have gone without bread in the months of June and July last.

It is thought by many, that it would be a most fortunate circumstance for the country, if the farmers and graziers were all to sell their crops and cattle immediately at market, without the intervention of a middle-man. Let us see what would be the consequence of this. If the farmer is a poor man, he must be under the necessity of selling for what he can get, in order to pay his rent, the prices would be at or near those of plentiful years, the market would be in danger of being glutted, and the commodity would be expended and consumed beyond the proportion
due

due to the other months of the year, just as happened in what may be called the ages of famine. On the other hand, those few farmers who may happen to be possessed of some capital, and who could afford to reserve part of their stock for the spring and summer months must have a much larger profit than a dealer, in order to defray their expenses, and indemnify them for their loss of time in bringing so small a quantity to market. Add to this the great cruelty of compelling a farmer or grazier, whether rich or poor, to resort to a distant market, at a great expense and loss of time, to the neglect and detriment of his domestic concerns, which it is of the utmost consequence to the public as well as himself, that he should attend to with unremitting labour and undisturbed vigilance and attention. It is evident, therefore, that it is only by means of a middle-man, possessed of a capital, that this admirable system of public economy can be carried into effect. There is in this case a fortunate or rather providential coincidence of private interest with public utility, accomplishing purposes which it is not in the power of human wisdom

wisdom to bring about by the most elaborate system of regulation. This merchant, middleman, or forestaller, as he is sometimes nicknamed, is he who lays up and reserves for the day of want, which awaits us at the end of the season, what would have been heedlessly squandered in the beginning of it.

Is a merchant, middleman, and forestaller, then the same?

Let us see whether it is possible to draw a line between these descriptions of people. Suppose a dealer in cattle goes fifty miles from the metropolis to purchase them, and there meets a grazier who has brought his cattle fifty miles farther, and has got so far on his road, but is desirous of disposing of them, in order that he may return home to mind his affairs: is it conceivable that any prejudice can arise to society, from the dealer purchasing these cattle, any more than from his purchasing those of the graziers on the spot? Now, if this is fair and legal, is it not equally so, to make the like purchases at one-half,

or two-thirds, or any part of the way to town? If it is not, where is it that fair dealing ends, and forestalling begins? Is it at Northampton, or Dunstable; at Uxbridge, or Knightsbridge? Will it be maintained, that the owner of cattle will part with them at Knightsbridge upon any other principle than he would upon his own farm, or on any part of the road, namely, the saving himself time and expense? If this were not the case, why does he not go on to the market, and get the same price as the dealer to whom he sold them? It may be said, the dealer may over-reach the simple countryman. He is, surely, less likely to do so near the market, than fifty miles off, where he has much less opportunity of being informed of the state of the market. But, allowing that the countryman has been over-reached once, would he, or his neighbours who witnessed it, suffer themselves to be so imposed upon a second time? This answer will apply to all other cases.

I beg leave here to digress a moment, in order to enunciate some principles which I assume

sume in this reasoning, and that which is to follow.

First—That self-preservation and self-interest are the principal incentives to the bulk of mankind, in their labours and their dealings.

Secondly—That men will, in general, take the most obvious and effectual means of compassing these selfish objects. If a particular individual, from imbecility or caprice, acts contrary to his obvious and fair interest, this is to be considered as an exception, such as occurs in all moral propositions, and like other exceptions, proves and illustrates the general rule.

Thirdly—That it is the part of a wise and equitable government to protect men to the utmost, in those pursuits which have self-preservation and self-interest for their object, in so far as they do not, by violence, fraud, or injustice, infringe the rights of others.

Unless

Unless each individual were to make himself and his family the principal object of his care, our species could neither be sustained nor continued. The whole energy of productive labour, constituting industry, depends on this principle. The very existence of the life of the whole community depends on the labours of the ploughman and the weaver; but he must be very ignorant of human nature, who should ascribe any other motive to them than their own maintenance; or, who should consider it as an imputation on their morality, that general benevolence constitutes no part of their inducement, in the exercise of their toil and skill.* In order, there-

* In order to illustrate this farther, I shall borrow the words of an elegant and profound writer.

“Men are tempted to labour, and to practice lucrative arts, by motives of interest. Secure to the workman the fruits of his labour, give him the prospects of independence and freedom, the public has found a faithful minister in the acquisition of wealth, and a faithful steward in hoarding what he has gained. The statesman, in this, can do little more than avoid doing mischief.”

Ferguson's Essay on the History of Civil Society,
P. iii. Sect. 4.

fore,

fore, to call forth the various faculties and talents subservient to the wants of society, not only the protection of persons, and the security of property, seem necessary, but the most perfect freedom in augmenting, improving, and *disposing* of it, within the limits already mentioned. It is this, if I mistake not, which constitutes the dearest part of civil liberty, from which (according to some of the best judges), more than from our political liberty, is derived that enviable state of prosperity and happiness, wherein the state of this country stands so eminently contrasted with the tyranny and false policy prevailing in most other nations of the world.

Fourthly—That commerce is rendered equitable to the parties, and beneficial to society, by the seller endeavouring to get as much as he can for his commodity, and the buyer giving as little as he can, while the former is compelled to part with his commodity, and the latter induced to accept it, by a second contention which takes place between the dealers, who endeavour

to gain a preference at market by under-selling each other. By this double struggle, equity and reason is maintained in the commercial World, just as the frame of the natural World is upheld in its existence and order by the compound action of counteracting forces; and it is nearly as presumptuous in man to meddle with the one as with the other. From these contending principles, therefore, there arises an intermediate result, which is, upon the whole, the most salutary to society.

The inference, from the whole of these principles, is, that the advantages to be derived to mankind, from labour and commerce, are to be attained only by *security* and *competition*. For the farther illustration of them, I must refer to the justly celebrated work of Dr. Adam Smith, on the Wealth of Nations. From the little effect that this work has produced, one is tempted to think that it has answered little other purpose than that of an elegant amusement to men of learning and leisure, and not that

that of the most valuable practical instruction that can be met with in any human composition.

To return. The prejudice conceived against these middle-men depends on a fallacy which it is not difficult to explain. A hasty consideration of the subject leads most people to imagine that, in these transactions, there is an accumulated profit, at the expense of the consumer. They conceive that the grower parts with his commodity to the middle-man on the same terms he would to the consumer. This is not the case. It cannot be the case. He lets the middle-man have his corn or cattle for less than he himself would take at the market, and which, of reason and necessity, he must and ought to have, had he been at the additional expense, of time and money, in proceeding to the market. Nay, it is plain, that the middle-man, upon the enlarged scale on which he deals, can afford to take smaller profits on each transaction than the grower could, upon so small a quantity of the commodity.

As I cannot do so much justice to this subject as Dr. Smith, I have transcribed, in a note, two passages from his work.*

But

* “ The interest of the inland dealer, and that of the great body of the people, how opposite soever they may at first sight appear, are, even in years of the greatest scarcity, exactly the same. It is his interest to raise the price of his corn as high as the real scarcity of the season requires, and it can never be his interest to raise it higher. By raising the price, he discourages the consumption, and puts every body, more or less, but particularly the inferior ranks of people, upon thrift and good management. If, by raising it too high, he discourages the consumption so much, that the supply of the season is likely to go beyond the consumption of the season, and to last for some time after the next crop begins to come in, he runs the hazard not only of losing a considerable part of his corn by natural causes, but of being obliged to sell what remains of it for much less than what he might have had for it several months before. If, by not raising the price high enough, he discourages the consumption so little, that the supply of the season is likely to fall short of the consumption of the season, he not only loses a part of the profit which he might otherwise have had, but he exposes the people to suffer, before the end of the season, instead of the hardships of a dearth, the dreadful horrors of a famine. It is the interest of the people that their daily, weekly, and monthly, consumption, should be proportioned

But it is alleged, that when articles, constituting the necessaries of life, get into the hands
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tioned as exactly as possible to the supply of the season. The interest of the corn-dealer is the same. By supplying them, as nearly as he can judge, in this proportion, he is likely to sell all his corn for the highest price, and with the greatest profit; and his knowledge of the state of the crop, and of his daily, weekly, and monthly, sales, enable him to judge with more or less accuracy how far they really are supplied in this manner. Without intending the interest of the people, he is necessarily led, by a regard to his own interest, to treat them, even in years of scarcity, much in the same manner as the prudent master of a vessel is sometimes obliged to treat his crew. When he foresees that provisions are likely to run short, he puts them upon short allowance. Though, from excess of caution, he should sometimes do this, without any real necessity, yet all the inconveniences which his crew can thereby suffer, are inconsiderable, in comparison of the danger, misery, and ruin, to which they might sometimes be exposed by a less provident conduct. Though from excess of avarice, in the same manner, the inland corn-merchant should sometimes raise the price of his corn somewhat higher than the scarcity of the season requires, yet all the inconveniences which the people can suffer from this conduct, which effectually secures them from a famine in the end of the season, are inconsiderable in comparison of what they might have been exposed to by a more

of great dealers, who are smaller in number, they are enabled thereby to combine, so as to command

liberal way of dealing in the beginning of it. The corn-merchant himself is most likely to suffer from this excess of avarice; not only from the indignation which it generally excites against him, but though he should escape the effects of this indignation, from the quantity of corn which it necessarily leaves upon his hands in the end of the season, and which, if the next season happens to prove favourable, he must always sell for a much lower price than he might otherwise have had."

Smith on the Wealth of Nations, V. II. p. 106, 1st edit.

It is supposed that there is a certain price at which corn is likely to be forebought, that is bought up, in order to be sold again soon after in the same market, so as to hurt the people. But if a merchant ever buys up corn either going to a particular market, or in a particular market, in order to sell it again in the same market, it must be because he judges that the market cannot be so liberally supplied through the whole season, as upon that particular occasion, and that the price therefore must soon rise. If he judges wrong in this, and if the price does not rise, he not only loses the whole profit of the stock which he employs in this manner, but a part of the stock itself, by the loss and expenses which necessarily attend the storing and keeping the corn. He hurts himself, therefore, much more essentially than he can hurt even the particular

command the market, and produce all the effects of a monopoly.

I crave

particular people whom he may hinder from supplying themselves upon that particular market-day, because they may afterwards supply themselves just as cheap upon any other market-day. If he judges right, instead of hurting the great body of the people, he renders them a most important service. By making them feel the inconveniences of a dearth somewhat earlier than they otherwise might do, he prevents their feeling them afterwards so severely as they certainly would do, if the cheapness of price encouraged them to consume faster than suited the real scarcity of the season. When the scarcity is real, the best thing that can be done for the people is to divide the inconveniences of it as equally as possible through all the different months, and weeks, and days, of the year. The interest of the corn-merchant makes him study to do this as exactly as he can; and as no other person can have either the same interest, or the same knowledge, or the same abilities to do it so exactly as he can, this most important operation of commerce ought to be trusted entirely to him; or, in other words, the corn-trade, so far at least as concerns the supply of the home market ought to be left perfectly free.

The popular fear of engrossing and forestalling may be compared to the popular terrors and suspicions of witchcraft. The

I crave here the closest attention while I detect this most dangerous and specious fallacy ; and, if I can do justice in words to those grounds upon which my own conviction is founded, I am confident I shall carry the like conviction to the mind of every man of ordinary understanding, who, divesting himself of passion and prejudice, will candidly lend his attention.

I believe, according to all the rules, both of law and reason, the *onus probandi* lies on the affirmative side of a question. It is fair, there-

unfortunate wretches accused of this latter crime, were not more innocent of the misfortunes imputed to them, than those who have been accused of the former. The law which put an end to all prosecutions against witchcraft, which put it out of any man's power to gratify his own malice, by accusing his neighbour of that imaginary crime, seems effectually to have put an end to those fears and superstitions, by taking away the great cause which encouraged and supported them. The law which would restore entire freedom to the inland trade of corn, would probably prove as effectual to put an end to the popular fears of engrossing and forestalling."

Smith's Wealth of Nations, Vol. II. p. 118. 1st edit.

fore,

fore, to begin, by calling for the proofs of these combinations and monopolies. I have never heard any adduced. When proofs have been called for, we have heard nothing but a repetition of the assertion. When the advocates of it are pressed on this point, we are told, that though there may be no express covenant between the dealers and producers of corn, cattle, or butter, there is a virtual or tacit one implied in the common interest which binds them together. But as this remark (if there be any force in it) will apply to every branch of trade whatever, there could be no such thing as fair trade in the world: commerce itself would only be another word for conspiracy and oppression, and no article could any where be procured at a just and reasonable rate.

When they are pressed still farther, they allege that provisions differ from other articles of trade, in this respect, that, as they are necessary to life, the consumer has no option, as in many other articles, and must therefore take them upon any

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terms.

terms. But if there were any truth in this observation, society would be more or less exposed to this injury at all times. The same capital could purchase a large quantity at a lower rate, as a smaller quantity at a high rate, so that it would be in the power of middle-men, at all times, to deal out provisions at an exorbitant price.

If there was any weight in this argument it would also hold with regard to other articles of necessity, for provisions are not the only articles necessary to life. Raiment is as necessary as food, but the scarcity and high price of cloth has never, that I know of, been viewed as a matter of public grievance; nor have manufacturers and merchants ever been the objects of the clamour and odium with which farmers and corn-dealers have been persecuted, though this article, from the manner in which it is produced, and the limited number of those who deal in it, is infinitely more likely to become the object of combination and monopoly than corn. One cause of this is, that cloth is not liable to casual fluctuations in quantity,

tity, as corn is from bad seasons. Another cause will be assigned hereafter.

There is the like blind infatuation in all the popular notions upon this subject. How absurd, for instance, is the idea, that in times of scarcity articles of food are destroyed, with a view to enhance the price of what remains. We are told that the Dutch, in consequence of sometimes widely mistaking in their calculations of the quantity of spices wanted for the markets of Europe, by reason of the remoteness of their settlements, and finding, on their arrival, that they have imported much more than they want, throw a large proportion of them into the sea. I am not competent to decide upon the truth of this, but I might safely admit that it is not incredible that this operation of commerce may be practised upon a superabundant article of luxury, the spontaneous production of those distant possessions from whence it is brought. But if we were told that when the Dutch destroy their spices it is not when they are superabundant, but when they are most scarce, who would believe this? This, however,

is

is a most favourite dogma of faith, with regard to corn ; and it is with a mixture of pity and disgust that we sometimes hear those who pass for men of education not ashamed to confess their belief in it. If any man in his senses could be found at once so wicked and foolish as to practice this, it would certainly be done in years of the greatest abundance. But when we consider that it is not in times of overflowing plenty, but in those of scarcity and distress that it is said to be done ; that it is not in an article of luxury but a necessary of life ; that it is not a spontaneous production of the earth, but the most precious fruit of human toil, insanity itself could not be guilty of such an action ; and the belief of it is as disgraceful to human reason as that of any of the dogmas of the most groveling superstition.

The law * we have alluded to was admitted on the statute-books about the same time that transubstantiation was expunged from the canon-book, and seems to have been the worthy suc-

* The statute of Edward VI.

cessor of that article of faith. I can as easily believe that bread is beef, as that bread or beef of a wholesome quality can, in times of public distress, be destroyed by any human being, for avaricious ends; or that the whole body of farmers, graziers, and dealers, in the kingdom can enter into a conspiracy against the consumers.

In the early stages of commerce it was confined to a few hands. Any one who possessed a moderate capital, with genius to avail himself of it, soon outstripped his poor and ignorant neighbours. In the 15th century there arose in Europe the family of a merchant, which, by successful commerce attained to the dignity and importance of that of a sovereign prince, so as in the succeeding century to give two Pontiffs to Rome, and two Queens to France. In the 16th and 17th centuries there were much richer merchants in England than at this moment, though commerce is now increased a hundred fold. Though there are now-a-days thousands who attain competency, hundreds who attain opulence, none by mere commerce attain princely

princely fortunes as formerly. What merchant can now compare in wealth with Sir Thomas Gresham, founder of the Royal Exchange, or Mr. Sutton, the founder of the Charter-house? It was in those ages that the founders of several of the most illustrious families in England acquired their opulence by commerce, and the situation of first magistrate of London, was then not an uncommon road to the peerage.* In those times combinations and monopolies must have been much more practicable; but though we hear of monopolies of various kinds, to the detriment of society, we never heard that the great articles of necessity were the objects of them. How much more impossible must this be in our days, when capital is so diffused, when every thing is kept to its just and salutary level, by a system of fair and equitable competition?

* I need make no apology to the noble families of Osborne, Gower, Capel, Waldegrave, and Craven, for ranking them with the House of Medici.

Let

Let any one reflect for a moment, that, in order to establish a combination, with regard to the necessities of life, not only all the merchants, factors, jobbers, and middle-men, of all descriptions, but all the growers must concur in forming a conspiracy against the public, mutually pledging their faith, that none of them will undersell another, and then let him ask himself, if he can believe this. It is considered as next to impossible, that a conspiracy against the state of ten or twelve individuals can remain long a secret. How comes it then that among so many thousand farmers, graziers, and dealers, none have ever yet peached? The only difficulty in refuting such an assertion is the difficulty of finding adequate words to express its absurdity. I must resort again to my first argument, that not the least proof has ever been brought in support of the existence of such combinations and monopolies; so that to attempt to prove a negative would be fighting with a phantom. Gratuitous assertions are as boundless as the wild imagination of man, and endless as the affirmative propositions arising out of the possible combinations of language. He, therefore, who

should engage to prove that universal combination and monopoly, with regard to the necessities of life, do *not* exist, or that these necessities are *not* destroyed through avarice, during dearths and famines, would be undertaking the same sort of task as any one would who should undertake to prove the negative of the dream of an enthusiast or lunatic. It is impossible any longer to treat the subject seriously,

We hear daily, from men by no means deficient in good sense, that one of the principal causes of the present high prices is the quantity of capital in the country, and the facility of obtaining money by credit, whereby dealers are enabled to speculate and keep corn out of the market. But it will not be alleged that men, however rich, or however much at a loss to employ their money, will engage in any trade but with a view to gain by it. Now it is evident, that if they keep up the article beyond a certain point, they must lose, and if it is short of that point, these capitalists are the benefactors and saviours of the community, by feeding the markets, and re-

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serving

erving such a stock, as under the influence of security of property, and the check of competition, will exactly serve to carry us round the year, and on terms proportioned to the total *quantum* of provisions, provided their speculations have been made upon sound grounds.

It appears that this must have been as nearly as possible the case last year, for that there is no surplus of last year's crop, nor of the unexampled importations that were made, is proved by its being necessary prematurely to thresh out part of the crop which has just been gathered in, for the daily supply of the market. This is sufficient answer to those who maintained that corn was unnecessarily kept up; and, after what has been said, it would be an insult to the meanest understanding to use any words to disprove that it has been hoarded or thrown into the river. The fact appears clearly to be, that the crop of last year, together with what was imported, has been with great economy barely equal to the necessities of the country; and had the dealers in corn been

so blind to their own interest as to have hoarded a month's supply, over and above what was wanted, after the gathering in of the new crop, how much less an evil would this have been than to have sold off the whole stock a month before the arrival of the new supply; in other words, to have created a famine, which, I repeat it, would have been the infallible consequence of bringing the corn to market at the beginning of the season, at the price of a plentiful year. Ought we not in this, as in other instances, to adore the wisdom and goodness of Divine Providence, which, by the spontaneous and irresistible, though silent co-operation of natural and moral causes, accomplishes the most salutary ends, in spite of the vain efforts and officious interference of human policy?

The want of a surplus essentially distinguishes this year from former years, and goes far towards explaining the continuation of the high prices, more especially when it is taken into account, that the present crop is considerably below

an average one,* and that the potatoes, which have, for many years, been such an uncommon resource, have greatly failed this year, from the following natural cause. The last summer was the hottest and driest of any upon record, no rain having fallen from the 4th of June, till the 19th of August, and the heat was unexampled. This forced the potatoes rapidly to maturity, without their attaining their usual size, and when the rains came, in August, in place of growing larger, they germinated, which has greatly spoiled their quality. It is evident from this, that the utmost economy will be necessary, in order to carry us round the year.

The last argument I shall use, in proof of the reality of the scarcity is the immense importation. From the necessity of importation, for many years

* The crops upon the clay grounds, which make a large proportion of the whole, have failed, in consequence of the earth being baked, as it were, by the long and excessive heat which succeeded the wet weather in May. The corn, also, which was standing after the 19th of August, when the rains came on, was generally spoiled, great part of it having grown as it stood.

past, it is evident that the production of this country has not in that time been equal to its wants. The annual average importation for twenty years preceding the present, was 160,000 quarters; for the last ten years, 400,000; but from the first of September, 1799, to the middle of October, 1800, the importation has been between 11 and 1,200,000 quarters.

While this statement proves the general deficient state of our agriculture, for a series of years, it carries irresistible conviction, if any proof were still wanting, of the unequalled deficiency of last year; especially when it is also considered that this corn was attracted hither, notwithstanding its being high priced, and hard to be procured abroad; for, the crops were scanty last year, in the countries bordering on the Baltic; and the King of Prussia, at one time, prohibited the exportation of corn from his dominions: and, though there was a better crop in America than there had been for some years, it has been deficient there for the last seven years,

years, on account of the devastation of the Hessian fly.

The scarcity, occasioned by the bad season last year, being established as the main cause of the high price of provisions, let us next inquire whether there are not subordinate and secondary causes of it. Several of these have been urged with plausibility, and probably with some truth.

1st, The depreciation of money.—The same denominations of coin will not go half so far, in purchasing the articles of living, as they did forty years ago; and the question is, whether the wages of the labourer have kept pace with this. It is well known that wages have been greatly raised, within these few years, as well as the pay of the army and navy. Whether this has kept exact pace with the depreciation of money, is a very difficult and delicate question; but it would be highly impolitic, at any time, to raise wages by law; and it would be both impolitic and unreasonable to do so, in a case of casual and temporary

temporary distress, such as the present, as the whole plan of public economy and safety would thereby be deranged, and they could never again be reduced.

2dly, The increased consumption, in consequence of the war.—This is a point which admits of pretty accurate solution by calculation. The number of land forces employed is under 200,000, but we shall take them at that. The number of seamen and marines, voted by parliament, is 120,000. The prisoners of war have at times been above 30,000, though now under that number. Now, the two first classes would be consuming provisions, wherever they were, and provisions of this country; whereas a considerable number, on foreign service, are maintained from the production of other countries, not to mention the diminution of consumers by the sword and deadly climates. It is, nevertheless, true, that foldiers and sailors consume more provisions, particularly animal food, than they would in the situation of peasants or artisans. Let us give an ample allowance, and say that

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our 330,000 foldiers, failors, and prisoners of war, consume double the quantity they otherwise would do. The population of the three kingdoms, according to the latest and best estimates, is between twelve and thirteen millions. This increased consumption, therefore, is not quite one-thirty-sixth part of the whole. Now, what should we say to the master of a family who should allege, that he has wherewithal amply to maintain thirty-six persons, but that if a single one were added, it would be productive of the greatest distress to the whole? Is there a man, deserving the name of a Briton, who can entertain so mean an opinion of the spirit and resources of his country, or who can employ so pitiful an argument, to cramp the national exertions necessary for public defence!

It has been attempted to connect the war with the scarcity, in other respects. It can hardly be questioned that loans and increased taxes, by multiplying the circulating medium, have a tendency to depreciate money, and thereby unsettle, for a time, the due ratio between

wages and the price of provisions. But, as this has no influence in checking productive industry (the true and only criterion and constituent of national prosperity), it can hardly be called an evil ; and, considered as a crimination of ministers, it is at once so shallow and captious, as to deserve no answer.

3dly, Agriculture not keeping pace with population and manufactures. Dr. Goldsmith has been heard to confess, that his *Deserted Village* was merely a poetical fiction ; and Dr. Price's statements and reasonings, in proof of the decrease of population in England, have been completely refuted. London, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Hull, and other towns, afford sufficient proof of the great increase of population, from trade and manufactures, in the course of this century ; while there is no proof of any decrease of it in villages. But if agriculture, which may be called the manufacture of corn, had advanced *pari passu* with other manufactures, there ought to be a sensible increase of population in the villages also. This does not
appear

appear to be the case ; nor has there been an extension of agriculture, proportioned to the prosperity of the country in other respects. Though this, therefore, is here reckoned among the secondary causes, in so far as respects the present scarcity, it is the main cause, in so far as respects the general high price of provisions, and the inadequate supply of corn, by our domestic agriculture, for so many years past.— A limited quantity of land in cultivation can only produce a limited quantity of corn ; and this is found not to be adequate to the demands of our population. The importation, which has so long been necessary, is an incontrovertible proof of this fact.

As the produce of the ground is subject to the same rules of reasoning as any other manufacture, we may derive some light by comparing it with the manufacture of cloth. These articles agree in being both necessities of life ; but they differ in this respect, that the production of corn is restricted by the limited quantity of cultivated land, which may be called the raw material of

corn; whereas cloth, in consequence of an abundant supply of the raw material, admits of an abundant production, so as to afford not only enough for domestic consumption, but for large exportation. In consequence of cloth not being subject to the same scarcity as corn, it has never fallen under the suspicion of being monopolised, or kept up by combination; and this alone is a sufficient proof, as has already been said, of the impossibility of the public being distressed in the supply of any article of necessity, except from absolute and real scarcity.

4thly, The prosecution of those who are invidiously called forestallers and regraters. It has already been abundantly proved, that no definition can be given to discriminate forestallers from other dealers. All dealers must, therefore, be more or less apprehensive of being deemed criminal by construction of law. This crime is not a *malum in se*; therefore, no man's conscience can point it out to him: and it differs from all other *mala prohibita*, in not admitting of any precise description; so that, under the influence

influence of such ambiguous and unconscious guilt, they must live in a dread of our tribunals, something like what we may conceive heretics to do, under the awe of the inquisition.

Now, there is no maxim in commerce better established, than that profits must bear proportion to risks; and this is so fully recognised, in the practice of trade, that it would be losing time to set about proving it: but the present subject affords an apt example, whereby to illustrate it.

When a dealer, then, subjects himself to the penalties and opprobrium incident to a legal prosecution, and to the still more terrible vengeance of a misguided and tumultuous populace, aiming at the destruction of his character, property, and life, will it be a small additional profit that can compensate for all this? Such men of character and capital, as are more timid, will be driven from the trade. What has saved us lately, from conflagrations and massacres, but the country happening to be in a state of armed preparation?

preparation? And what have those to answer for, who, by misrepresentation, have, though unintentionally, goaded the multitude to acts of outrage, whereby they have already increased the evil, by striking terror into those who should supply the markets! And they might have been the victims of their own fury, had not a firm and temperate system of prevention been adopted. Doctrines of the most serious tendency had been propagated from the bench, the bar, the hustings, and the press, directly, though unintentionally, countenancing the popular passions and prejudices, which incited to those acts. Let us not, however, withhold our due praise from a gentleman in a public situation, who having too precipitately and credulously related in a public speech, the history of a family driven to despair and suicide by famine, which was found by inquiries on the spot to be totally void of truth, took occasion at one of the next public meetings, to make amends, by declaring his disbelief in monopolies and combinations. And may we also presume to hope, that those virtuous and learned judges, whose

decrees

decrees and authority carry such deserved weight, may be led to re-consider a subject upon which, as it lies out of the tract of those professional habits and studies to which they so honourably devote themselves, it is no disgrace for them to have formed a hasty opinion?

5thly, The assize of bread.—Historians mention that this was first instituted in the time of Henry III. an age of darkness and ignorance. It directly militates against the freedom of commerce, by establishing a *maximum* of profit, and must therefore be pernicious to society and individuals, if there is any reason or justice in those principles which I have humbly attempted to establish. I shall endeavour to point out some of the inconveniences of it which I believe have not been commonly attended to.

1st. The baker, in consequence of his profit being fixed, has but little inducement to buy his flour as cheap as he can, which he would do if his profits were to arise to him like those of
other

other tradesmen. This is sufficiently obvious. But there is another consequence not so obvious, though equally true, of the utmost importance, and to which I solicit the most particular attention. The miller, knowing he may have what price he pleases from the baker, is little anxious how much he gives the farmer. He has been known to offer him more than he asked. Who does not see that all this tends to raise the ultimate price on the consumer? who does not here see that the greater the scarcity the greater the temptation? who does not see that it is to this, together with the discouragement given to the supplies of the market, by the intimidation of dealers, and not to the *ignis fatuus* of forestalling and monopolizing that we are to look for the real causes of the price of bread being higher than the scarcity will warrant? This I believe to be the case to a certain degree, and for these two reasons alone, which are perfectly adequate to account for it.

2dly. The objection above-mentioned applies to affize in the abstract, but I beg leave also to

to point out some great errors in the particular manner in which it is now conducted.

The difference of the price at which white and brown bread are directed to be sold remains the same at whatever price bread may be. The difference in the quartern loaf is, at this time, three halfpence, so that supposing the price of the white loaf to be sixpence, that of the brown would be one-fourth less: but supposing the price of the white loaf to be a shilling, that of the other would only be one-eighth less. Is not this giving an increasing premium on the consumption of white bread, proportioned to the rise of the price, so that when there is the greatest dearth, there is the least inducement to eat brown bread; and there is a virtual prohibition of it when most wanted for the relief of the poor? It will be shewn still farther, hereafter, of what great detriment this is in these times.

3dly. The assize is so set, that the baker has a greater interest in selling white bread than brown bread. The flour of which the latter is made is

leis retentive of moisture in the oven, so that a greater quantity of flour is necessary, in order to produce the same weight of bread. It also requires more yeast. These circumstances have not been taken into account in the assize.

It would be too tedious here to enumerate all the inaccuracies in the assize. They have been pointed out by a very ingenious and respectable clergyman,* who has employed great labour and attention on this subject. It is a strong objection to assize in general, that it is not in the power of calculation to construct a table which shall be equitably adjusted to all the varieties and fluctuations of the materials. In order even to make an approximation to equity, much more skill and science is required than can be expected from those to whom this is intrusted.

* The Rev. Luke Heslop, Archdeacon of Buckingham, in a work entitled "Observations on the Statute of the 31st of George II. &c.

Having

Having considered the causes of the present scarcity and high price of provisions, it now remains to point out the remedies.

It clearly appears, from what has been already stated, that our agriculture is not adequate to our population. The necessity of importation for so many years past is an incontrovertible proof of this.

It follows from this, that the primary object of the legislature will be to extend cultivation so as to augment our internal production. The whole secret of the remedy we are in quest of may therefore be expressed in this aphorism or rather axiom, that "When there is a deficiency of any thing in nature, it can only be supplied by increasing its quantity." This being self-evident, it would not be worth while to enunciate it in words, were it not for the unaccountable errors prevailing on the subject; for it is plain that every other principle or plan of curing the evil must either be a mere palliative or

quackery and juggle, affording neither substantial nor permanent relief.

Were we to hear, that either from some natural cause, or by a miracle, an island had started from the sea, in St. George's Channel, consisting of one million of arable acres of land, we should exclaim, that here was the remedy we wished for, and that we had only to let loose a share of our capital and industry, in order to obtain in a few years an annual supply of two millions or more of quarters of wheat, which would more than supply bread for the same number of people.

But would it not be still better news for us to hear that there is actually three times this number* of virgin acres awaiting the plough, in the bosom of our old island, and that neither a convulsion of nature, nor a miracle is necessary, but

* See Sir John Sinclair's Address to the Board of Agriculture, Dec. 1795.

merely

merely an effort of parliamentary interposition, in order to call them into cultivation.

It is in vain to look for any other means of effectually securing future plenty, and rendering ourselves independent of foreign supplies, which must ever be precarious but that of bringing waste lands into cultivation, by a law for the general division and enclosure of commons. Since about a million of quarters of wheat were imported in the twelve months preceding September last, besides other species of grain, there ought to have been half a million of additional acres of land in cultivation, in order to have superseded the foreign supply, allowing each acre to produce two quarters, which is below the average. But even in this case, the scarcity and dearth would have been the same, independent of foreign supplies; so that it may be safely affirmed, that not less than a million of new acres, brought into cultivation, can secure future plenty, and therefore reasonable prices, in ordinary seasons. Even in this case, importation would be necessary, in order to keep up the usual
 plenty

plenty after such bad seasons as that of 1799. There can be no doubt, that the wisdom, power, and patriotism, of parliament, now about to assemble for this purpose, will devise and employ expedients for surmounting the obstacles that have heretofore marred this salutary measure, whether they arise from popular prejudices, individual interests, or the forms of law. It will of course be the study of the legislature to encourage the cultivation of these lands, when appropriated, by such exemptions and abatements of burdens, as to their wisdom may appear expedient and effectual. Will it not be worth while to consider whether, in place of suffering tythes to hang upon this new source of wealth, as a perpetual tax upon industry and improvement, it would not be advisable to assign to the clergy, in the first instance, a certain proportion of the rough land, as a glebe? But it would be presumptuous in me to enter into the details of a subject, which is about to fall under the consideration of an able and enlightened senate,

The culture of potatoes is an immense resource: There are none of the articles constituting the food of man, of which so much can be raised in so small an area, and with so little labour; and, as it is a victual requiring no preparation, like the grains, except the action of fire, each potato being as it were a little loaf ready baked by nature, this invaluable root might justly be named the root of scarcity. The increased cultivation of them will depend chiefly on the private advantage which individuals may find in applying their labour to this branch of tillage, in preference to that of grain. Some encouragement, by premium, or otherwise, will probably be thought of by the legislature, to give them a more decided preference, as this would add immensely to the general stock of wholesome food.

But these measures are only remote resources. The nation will look to the legislature for some immediate steps for the relief of the present urgent distress.

1st. Importation has already proved to be our main resource ; the quantity imported the last twelve months having been one-eighth of the whole consumption of England,* a circumstance unexampled in the history of this country. It is this that must be our great resource in future. A free trade, with the assistance of bounties, will again save us. It deserves to be remarked, that the whole of the immense importation of last year was made by private merchants ; and we had, in the scarcity of the year 1795, a beautiful and instructive illustration of the wisdom of committing trade to the spontaneous energies of self-interest, and of not even approaching it with the hand of power. Our government, in that year, with the most paternal solicitude for the relief of the public, undertook to import, on their own account, and to sell at

* In a work, intituled, *Corn Tracts*, published between thirty and forty years ago, the proportion of the corn imported to that produced in England, is computed at one five hundred-and-seventieth part. This work is ascribed to the Right Honourable George Grenville, with whom this branch of commerce is said to have been a favourite study.

a moderate price. The consequence was, that private trade was entirely damped, while this importation was carried on ; for, though individuals will enter into competition with one another, who will enter into competition with the treasury ? The error was soon perceived, and the measure, after being pursued for a short time, was abandoned, on the same pure principles with which it had been adopted, and a most efficient importation has been made, ever since, by private traders. A free trade, therefore, and a small bounty, in addition to the indemnification enacted last year, in case of a fall of the market, pending the voyage, will carry this resource to its utmost extent. I say a small bounty, for a large one might cause such a sudden and alarming drain from the foreign countries, which supply it, that a prohibition might be the consequence, as happened with regard to the Prussian dominions last winter.

2dly. The abolition of the assize, or if popular prejudice will not allow of this, the framing of

it on more correct principles, and particularly taking care that it shall encourage, in place of discouraging, the use of household bread. The objections to the existence of any assize at all have been already stated; and, with regard to the abuses of it, as it actually exists, there is evidence, on the records of parliament; for it appeared, from the examination of Archdeacon Heslop, and others, in the month of February last, that the difference of the produce of white flour, and that of brown flour, affording bread equally wholesome and nutritious, and to most people equally palatable, was in the proportion of 30 to 52 in 60 pounds of wheat. This prodigious difference in the produce of wheat, and the effect of it as a matter of public economy, must forcibly strike the attention of every considerate person. And it is observed, by the same committee, in their report of the 6th of March last, that, “from the manner in which the assize is now set, the profit of the baker is *far more considerable* upon pure wheaten bread, than on that of a coarser quality. This is a matter of
 very

very considerable importance, and one of those which will, no doubt, draw the attention of parliament.

3dly. To take steps for stopping prosecutions against dealers in corn, or, if popular prejudices will not admit of this, so to modify the laws, that the execution of them shall not be detrimental to the public. If this is not done, men of credit, character, and capital, through whom alone a fair and regular supply of the market can be obtained, will be entirely driven from the trade, which will fall into the hands of hucksters and adventurers. I know, for certain, that these prosecutions have already had a bad effect, and if they should still go on, will tend to frustrate, in some measure, the beneficial effects of the comparatively plentiful harvest. Notwithstanding the crop of this year has failed to a certain degree, and is not assisted by that surplus of the preceding crop, which used to serve for three months, or more, after harvest, the public will have a right to expect some farther fall. If this shall not be the case, it will

be difficult to assign any other cause than the diminution of competition from narrowing the trade, the great profits necessary to enable growers to bring their own produce to market, and the inhanement of profits in consequence of the inhanement of risks to those unintimidated dealers, who may still continue to supply the market.

It was perhaps the intention of the legislature to have repealed the whole of these laws, when the statute of Edw. VI. was repealed in 1772.*

The

* I am informed the following circumstance gave rise to that act of parliament: London was at that time supplied with immense quantities of fresh butter, from that part of Yorkshire, called Holderness. The dairies were farmed by London dealers, who were in the practice of accommodating other shop-keepers with what they could not dispose of themselves. It is plain, that it was entirely out of the power of farmers to bring this commodity to market themselves, and as it is a very perishable article, the prompt method that has been described, was the best possible for the public benefit. In the course of this traffic, however, one of these dealers was brought under the predicament of Edw. VI.'s statute. and was convicted. Lord Mansfield, from principles of justice and humanity

The preamble to this bill, and the speeches in the debate, particularly that of Mr. Burke, set

humanity, and perceiving that the infliction of the penalty would ruin this trade, contrived to suspend judgement, and suggested the repeal of the statute in the interim.

In the year 1767, in consequence of complaints concerning the high price of provisions, and petitions having been presented to the House of Commons on that subject, ascribing it to the practices of forestallers, jobbers, &c. a bill was ordered to be brought into parliament, to enforce the laws against such offenders; but the committee appointed to consider these laws came to the following resolutions, viz.

1st. " That it is the opinion of this committee, that the several laws relating to badgers, engrossers, forestallers, and regrators, by preventing the circulation of and free trade in corn, and other provisions, *have been the means of raising the price thereof in many parts of the kingdom.*"

2d. " That it is the opinion of this committee, that the House be moved for leave to bring in a bill to remedy the evils occasioned by the said laws."

In consequence of fresh petitions from the country, to the same purport as the former, the matter lay over till 1772.

the impolitic tendency of the ancient laws in the strongest point of view.

In case the total repeal of those laws should not be judged safe, in the present irritated state of the public mind, I beg leave to suggest, with that diffidence which becomes one who does not belong to the profession of the law, that the sting might perhaps be taken from it, by enacting, that no conviction shall follow, unless the act committed shall be proved to have been detrimental to the public.*

4thly. Enforcing the act of last session, respecting stale bread—I understand this is so frequently infringed, that it is likely soon to go into desuetude. There is the following observation in the report of the committee of the 10th of February: “Your committee is strongly induced to

* This idea seems to meet with some countenance, from an expression of Lord Coke, who says, that “an engrosser may be indicted at the common law, as for an offence *malum in se*.”

Institutes of the Laws of England, p. iii.

recommend

recommend this, from the consideration that a very respectable physician has given it as his opinion, that new bread is far less wholesome than that which has been baked a number of hours." This was the only legislative measure adopted last session, in consequence of the report of the committee, and it was considered as of so much consequence, that, to prevent delay, the act was passed, without waiting for the usual formalities. And in the report of the 6th of March, after this act had taken effect for a few weeks, it is certified, on the testimony of six bakers, that the consumption had been thereby diminished one-sixth part. Upon inquiring * yesterday, at the baker who supplies my family, how this law came to be so much neglected, he gave as one reason, that, owing to the intimidation of dealers in wheat and flour, the supply had been at times of late so short, that he could not bake enough to enable him to keep it for twenty-four hours, as the law directs.

* 5th November, 1800.

5thly. The

5thly. The stopping of the distilleries, and of the making of starch and hair-power. These make a very inconsiderable part of the total consumption of the country; but this prohibition will argue at least the paternal care of the legislature, in attending even to the smallest means of economy, and will serve as an example to private families, to make voluntarily every possible retrenchment.

Having thus humbly stated what I conceive to be the most expedient and practicable means of relief, in the present distress, it would be entering into too wide a field, to specify what should *not* be done. There is one measure, however, upon which I should not have thought it necessary to make any remark, had I not heard it mentioned, by those from whom I should not have expected it, as a thing which might be advisable in the present hour: I mean the establishment of a *maximum* of price. Without entering into any reasoning, I shall just make one or two references to history. A *maximum* was

was tried under Edward II. during one of the worst administrations that England ever saw, and was abandoned, as mischievous and impracticable. It was tried in France, during an administration still more execrable and flagitious, namely, that of Robespierre, and was equally abandoned, for the same reasons. As it is a scheme that could only be dictated by the grossest ignorance and tyranny, and cannot, therefore, have even entered into the minds of our present rulers, no more need be said on the subject.

I have thus, my Lord, unburdened my mind, by humbly communicating what I felt it my duty not to withhold. I wish it were more worthy of your acceptance, and that of the public. I am sensible this letter might be rendered much more perfect, as to matter, as well as illustration and arrangement; but it has been composed, since the report of his Majesty's intention of assembling the parliament, at those short intervals of leisure which the indispensable duties of an active profession allowed. The whole of this subject is a matter of the utmost delicacy and

* importance

importance to the cause of humanity and public spirit, and upon which it behoves every man to throw all the light his abilities enable him. The first step towards alleviating the miseries of the poor is to ascertain from whence they proceed ; and, if we cannot immediately relieve their wants, to endeavour, at least, to sooth their discontents, by shewing them that the ground of their evil is imputable to natural and unavoidable causes, and not to inflame their passions, and exasperate their sufferings, by representing them as flowing from the crimes of their fellow subjects, and thereby impelling them to acts that must aggravate the evil ten-fold, and lead to the most tragical and fatal catastrophies.

If it were not taking up too much of your Lordship's time, it would be interesting to inquire upon what the strange credulity of mankind, on these points, is founded. I shall only shortly remark, that it is the nature of the human mind, when galled by suffering, to yield readily to jealousy and suspicion ; and, in this temper, " trifles light as air " are confirming evidence.

evidence. *Fear* is also very favourable to credulity, and it is upon this that superstitious credulity is chiefly built; for, whatever relates to the world of spirits, excites the strongest emotions in the mind. Next to this, animal subsistence seems to excite the deepest interest, as may be exemplified in the irrational anxieties of avarice, and the blind credulity with regard to the points in question; so that these aberrations of the human mind may be styled *temporal superstition*. It is stated by one of the ancients, as your Lordship knows, as the principal advantage attending the cultivation of reason, by education, that it enables the mind to surmount these vain fears. But, as this subject relates to the indispensable necessities of our animal nature, and is full of specious fallacies, it is perhaps one of the most difficult, for an uneducated mind, upon which to form a correct and dispassionate judgement. The time will come, when our more enlightened posterity will be as much astonished that the belief in forestalling and monopolizing the necessaries of life being the causes of the scarcity and high price of provisions,

visions, should prevail at the end of the 18th century, as we are at the grave characters who believed in ghosts and witches at the beginning of the 17th century. It is not quite two hundred years, since not only the King on the throne, and the judge on the bench, but the majority of the whole legislature of England, believed in witchcraft, as appears by an act of parliament passed against that imaginary crime in the reign of James I.

However mortifying it may be to human pride, that those who are called the better sort, give into such errors, let us make every allowance for those who have not the same advantages of information, and who, living from day to day by their labour, are much more deeply interested in the question, while they have not the advantage of liberal and enlightened minds to counteract their prejudices. When this is duly considered, we ought rather to admire the quietness and patience of the commonalty of England, than be surprized at their late transient and partial excesses. Whoever will study the
character

character of the common people of this island, will find much to admire in them, particularly that aversion to the shedding of blood, and to the vindictive use of edged weapons, which remarkably distinguishes them from all the nations of Europe, particularly the more southern. How cruel, then, to abuse the generous nature of such people ! It seems particularly incumbent on those in power, *on the ministers of Religion* and on all persons of education, to soothe, console, and instruct, the industrious artisan and labourer, on a subject on which they are so prone to errors of the most dangerous and fatal tendency ; to represent to them that this island is like a ship at sea, on a voyage of twelve months, with an inadequate store of provisions on board, and with only a precarious chance of any farther supply, and that too great an expenditure, in the beginning of the voyage, would produce a famine before they could arrive in port ; that therefore it becomes them to submit with Christian patience to being put on short allowance, not giving way to unmanly repinings, much less disgracing themselves by mutiny. This class of society should also have it explained

plained to them, that it is only by means of high prices that general frugality and diminished consumption can be effected: and it can be made plain to them, that the farmer ought to have such prices as to indemnify him for the shortness of his crop, and to enable him to continue and increase his tillage the ensuing year; that the farmers who produce, and the dealers who bring that produce to market, for the accommodation of society in general, and of the poor in particular, instead of being the objects of their indignation, ought to be considered as their best friends.

I have only farther to add, that, as this letter is intended for the public eye, and as a question may arise concerning the purity of the author's motive, he thinks it right to declare, that he is not only no dealer in any of the articles of life, but that he has not the smallest acquaintance or connection with any one who is so, nor with any of their connections. And, lest it should be said that he is probably some one in the pay of government, he equally disclaims this charge. He

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can bring proof that these were his opinions before any such questions were publicly agitated, and that he freely and publicly declared them since they have been agitated, at a time when it was generally believed that the majority of his majesty's ministers were of a different way of thinking.

But my great security against the misconstruction of my motives is, that the public think too well of your Lordship to believe that you would suffer yourself to be addressed by a sordid trader, or an unprincipled mercenary, but by one who is known to your Lordship to be, with the sincerest attachment and respect,

My Lord,

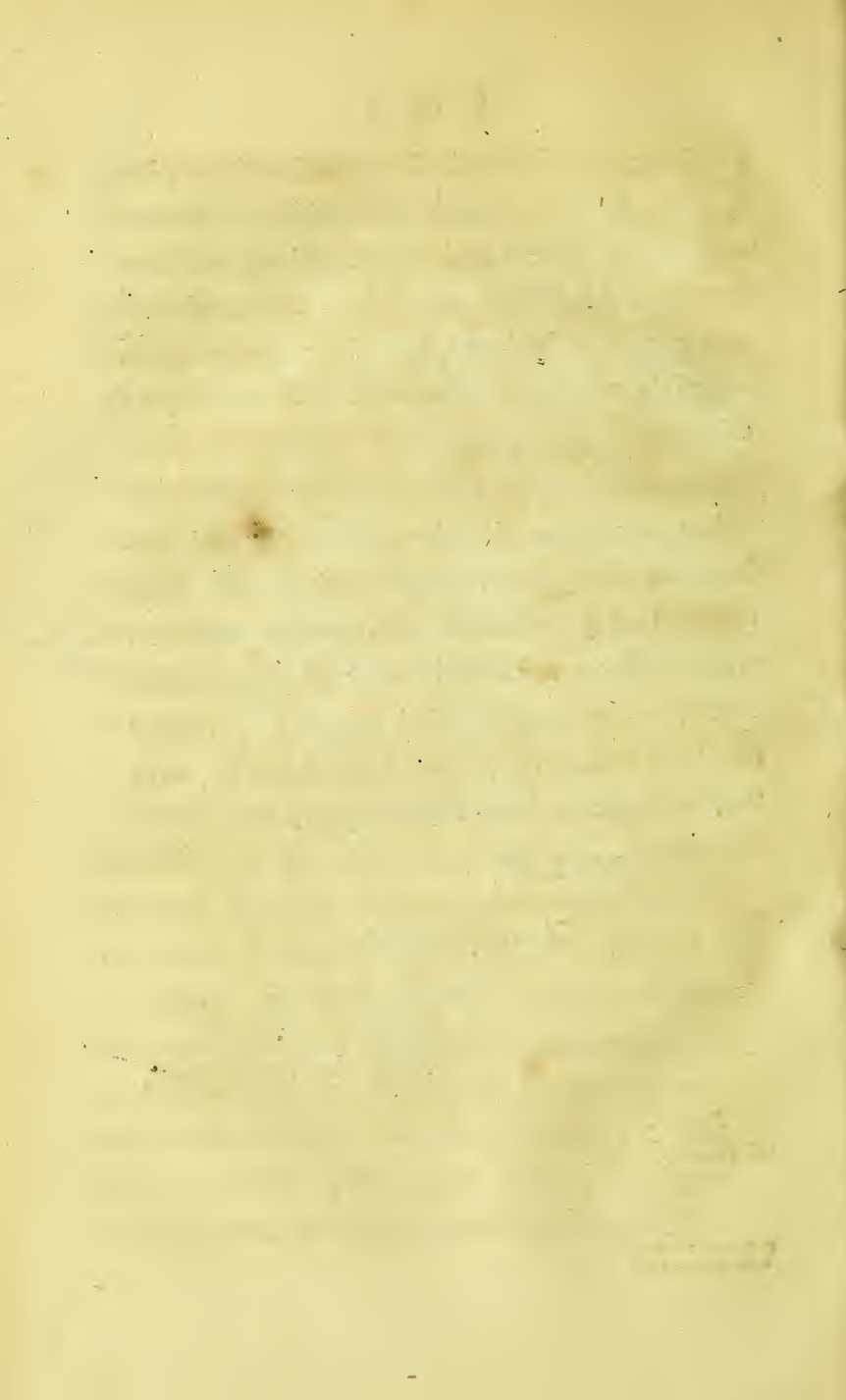
Your Lordship's

Most faithful and

Most obedient servant,

London,

8th November, 1800.



POSTSCRIPT.

December 25, 1800.

THE first step taken by parliament, after its meeting, on the 11th of last month, after fixing the bounties, was to ascertain the average amount of this year's crop throughout the kingdom. It appears, from the returns made in virtue of the precepts issued for that purpose, that the late crop is short of an average one by about one-fourth. It appears, farther, from these Reports, that the surplus of the crop of 1799, in aid of this year's, has not, in general, been equal to a supply of three * weeks, instead of ten

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* This appears from the following extract from the Report delivered a few days ago by the Committee of the House of Lords:

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or eleven weeks, which is computed to be the average surplus. Accurate statements * have also

“The Lords Committees have been informed, with scarcely any exception, that the stock of old corn was very nearly exhausted in the period of the late harvest; and, instead of the usual stock in the possession of the farmers, millers, and bakers, at that time (which is almost universally stated to be from two to three months consumption, and even sometimes more), they have been invariably informed, that the stock of this year was not, in any place, more than the consumption of about three weeks, and that many parts of the kingdom were at that time wholly supplied with foreign grain.”

As it would, therefore, be too much to assume this year's surplus at a supply of three weeks, I have taken it at two weeks.

* The following is an extract from the same report :

“*Wheat and Wheat-flour.*—From 1697 to 1766, both inclusive (a period of seventy years), the annual excess of export, on the average, from England and Scotland, amounted to 210,231 quarters.

“In 1767, there began to be an excess of import, amounting (on an average for eighteen years, from 1767 to 1784, both inclusive), to 91,825 quarters per annum.

“From

also been made out, of the imports and exports for the last hundred years. From these *data*, we are now enabled to make the following gross comparative statement of the two last crops, in relation to each other, and in relation to the average production and consumption of the country.

“ From 1785 to 1789, both inclusive (on an average of five years), the excess of import amounted to 198,641 quarters per annum.

“ Since that period (with the exception of the year 1792, when there was an excess of export amounting to 278,019 quarters), there had uniformly been an excess of import, which (on an average of five years, from 1790 to 1794, both inclusive), amounted to 182,021 quarters per annum.

“ From 1795 to 1799 (on an average of five years), to 469,966 quarters per annum.

“ And for twelve months, from the 26th of September, 1799, to the 27th of September, 1800, there have been imported

Into England, 1,032,121 quarters.

Into Scotland, 114,615

Annual consumption of Great Britain	-	-	Quarters. 8,000,000
Annual average produce, by an estimate deduced from the average of fifteen years preceding 1799, but not including it,	-	-	7,717,000

Crop of 1799, one-third deficient	-	-	4,858,000
Stock on hand, equal to eleven weeks consumption,			1,700,000
Importation	-	-	1,146,000
Total means of consumption last year	-	-	7,704,000
But deduct stock in hand when harvest came in, estimated at two weeks consumption	-	-	307,000
Actual consumption, last year	-	-	7,397,000
Retrenchment of consumption, last year	-	-	603,000

Crop of 1800, one-fourth deficient	-	-	5,788,000
Stock in hand, now reduced to two weeks consumption	-	-	307,000
Importation, estimated to be the same as last year			1,146,000
Total means of consumption, this year	-	-	7,241,000
But deduct, as before, the stock that will probably be in hand when the new crop comes in	-	-	207,000
For actual consumption, this year	-	-	7,034,000
Retrenchment of consumption required this year			966,000

It appears, therefore, that though this year's crop is not so deficient as that of last year, yet that the scarcity of the present year is, upon the whole, greater, owing to the smaller stock in hand at the coming in of the crop. The greater expenditure of corn for feed, in consequence of the extension of cultivation, tends also to diminish the quantity of food. These circumstances, together with some obstacles that have arisen in the usual channels of importation, in consequence of the misunderstanding with Russia, and the prohibition of exportation from the Prussian dominions, are probably the causes of the price of wheat * exceeding, at this time, what it was last year, and are additional motives to the practice of economy, by a religious attention to the late Royal Proclamation. They also prove the great expediency of the measures that have already been adopted, respecting the encourage-

* The price of the quartern-loaf has, this day, 25th December, 1800, risen to one shilling and nine-pence; the highest price, last year, was one shilling and six-pence farthing.

ment of the importation * of all sorts of grain; the use of substitutes † for wheat, and the encouragement

* The bounty, like that of last year, consists in an indemnity, in case the price should fall to a certain price pending the voyage. The price was fixed, last year, at ninety shillings for wheat; it is now fixed at a hundred shillings, for this grain, and has been raised proportionably for barley, oats, rye, and rice.

† In order to explain the advantage of this measure, let it be remarked, that the price of a commodity is chiefly determined, 1st, by the relation of the supply to the demand; 2d, by the necessities of the parties. The necessity of the purchaser is, in no instance, so urgent as in the article of provisions; but this is strongly and efficiently counteracted on the part of the seller by the perishable nature of his commodity, and the risk of his being ruined by meeting plenty with a large stock on hand. 3d, The unequal abilities of purchasers. In the present state of society this is greater than ever, as there never was a period in which so many could afford to live independently of productive labour. When the quantity of the necessaries of life is not equal to the supply, a retrenchment must take place some where, or a famine ensue. It cannot be expected, from the ordinary standard of human virtue, that

agement of the herring fishery, by an exemption from the duty on salt; and they prove the urgent necessity of the measures, respecting the exclusive use of stale bread, which has been renewed, and the universal use of bread made from the whole meal, which has also been newly adopted by parliament.

the rich will bring themselves to the level of the poor. The principal retrenchment, therefore, must be looked for from the latter. It has been explained, in a very ingenious and able manner, in a tract * which has just appeared, how a small addition to competition, among the purchasers of the principal articles of life, in a time of scarcity, will, without any combination among the dealers, cause a great and disproportionate increase of price. It has appeared, therefore, to the legislature, to be a matter of the utmost importance to lessen the consumption of wheat, and, thereby, diminish the demand for it, and have, for this end, directed all parochial relief to be furnished, in substitutes, such as rice and potatoes; and it is one of the principal objects of the late Royal Proclamation to save wheaten bread, and thereby reduce its price to the middling and labouring classes of the people.

* Investigation of the Cause of the present high Price of Provisions, by the Author of an Essay on the Principle of Population.

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